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S E C R E T BOGOTA 007893

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E.O. 12958: DECL: 08/18/2016

TAGS: PREL PGOV PTER CO

SUBJECT: COLMIL PENETRATES FARC HEARTLAND IN LA MACARENA

Classified By: Ambassador William B. Wood

Reasons: 1.4 (b) and (d)

Summary

11. (S) After months of intense campaigns, the COLAR has occupied former FARC strongholds and harried key FARC cocaine trafficking fronts in the Macarena region. La Macarena (Meta department) is key to the FARC -- as a core zone of coca cultivation, a historic homeland, and a strategic rear guard from which to attack Bogota. For the COLMIL, installing bases in a former 'no-go' zone is a big step forward, but holding more territory stretches military resources while not defeating an elusive enemy. For the GOC, supplanting a FARC narco-dominion with legitimate state governance and a legal economy will be a tougher challenge than the military victory. End Summary.

Context: Insurgents' Bread Basket and Historic 'Safe Haven'

12. (U) The La Macarena region, an area of about 21,000 square kilometers, is part of the FARC's historic heartland and makes up the western half of Meta department in central Colombia, south of mountain passes leading to Bogota. It is divided into eastern and western zones on either side of the Macarena mountain range. In addition to being a key mobility corridor into Bogota and the center of the country, it is a main coca growing area and funding source for the FARC's largest bloc -- the Eastern Bloc led by FARC military chief Mono Jojoy. The region contains one of Colombia's largest national parks, an important area for FARC coca cultivation. Because of its strategic importance, the Eastern Bloc has defended these areas against encroachment by the GOC. In December 2005, the FARC killed 29 soldiers in the mountains of Macarena, prompting the GOC to turn to manual coca eradication. Police suffered heavy losses guarding eradicators, leading to COLAR reinforcement of police security.

West Macarena: Blocking the FARC Offensive

13. (S/NF) The COLAR thwarted a FARC attempt to infiltrate Cundinamarca and Bogota from West Macarena via the Sumapaz plateau early this year. Responding to large-scale FARC movements in Macarena, the COLAR Fourth Division engaged FARC

forces in Eastern Macarena, while Joint Task Force Omega (JTFO) advanced as far north as the Papaneme. A newly-created COLAR battalion worked in the mountains to cut off the FARC's infiltration route. By early February the COLAR had successfully blocked the FARC's planned offensive. Further fighting produced significant FARC casualties. As JTFO took hold of northwest Meta, the FARC retreated south, finally standing to fight at the FARC stronghold of La Uribe.

JTFO broke through FARC harassment fire, pushed north, and confronted an estimated 1200 guerillas. The COLAF launched air strikes against the FARC forces beginning on February 28.

The second of these, on March 10, killed 100 Eastern Bloc members in a targeted camp.

¶4. (S/NF) Despite the FARC's heavy losses, high value FARC targets (HVTs) in the area escaped. Shortly before the COLAF began bombardments, the FARC sent a rescue force led by alias El Paisa, commander of the elite Teofilo Ferrero Mobile Column. Paisa set up an escape route, eluded the COLMIL, and guided the HVTs to safety.

¶5. (S/NF) After blocking the FARC's effort to return to the Sumapaz, the COLMIL moved to gain control over the West Macarena. Intense fighting took place around La Uribe on May 28, and Colombian Special Forces took the FARC stronghold of La Julia in early June without a fight. FARC units returned to La Julia after the Special Force's departure; JTFO then reoccupied the town. The COLMIL intends to occupy la Julia permanently, setting up a police station and a COLAR brigade headquarters. Civilian Ministers have made unprecedented visits to the area, providing free medical care and speaking of infrastructure and development plans.

East Macarena: Cutting the Coca Chain

¶6. (C) COLMIL efforts in the Eastern Macarena are aimed at eroding the FARC's coca profits. The Eastern Macarena hosts numerous FARC coca fields and a large number of coca processing labs. The Eastern Bloc exports coca to Brazil via the 16th Front. Some FARC fronts in the area are oriented more towards finance than combat, but all attacked GOC eradicators. These FARC attacks led to the deaths of seven civilian eradicators, 13 police, and 15 soldiers. Due to the FARC assaults, the GOC suspended manual eradication in August 2006 in favor of spraying.

¶7. (S/NF) The COLMIL's Fourth Division defended the eradicators, leading to continuous engagement with FARC forces. The COLMIL efforts significantly weakened the Eastern Bloc's combat capability. Embassy Milgroup sources describe the Eastern Bloc as being in disarray. Communications among Eastern Bloc commanders focus on desertion, and FARC recruitment of children is increasing. The COLAR recently uncovered a FARC arms depot and workshop in the jungle near Vista Hermosa, east of the serrania, depriving the Eastern Bloc of hundreds of uniforms and a large stockpile of weapons.

A Victory Leads to New Challenges

¶8. (C) The East Macarena continues as a battle of attrition.

The West Macarena campaign is a success story that produced good coordination between COLAR units (mainly due to the personal influence of General Rocha, who commands JTFO after previously leading the Fourth Division) and bold use of intelligence in tracking the enemy. It thwarted the FARC's Sumapaz ambitions and penetrated core FARC territory, contributing to GOC effort's to assert its presence throughout Colombia.

¶9. (C) Still, each military victory requires the COLAR to occupy more territory, leading it to convert mobile brigades into units of fixed area control and reducing offensive capacity. Moreover, against a guerilla opponent the victory

is not decisive: the FARC is weakened but can still lie low and try to wait out the GOC's will and resources. To achieve lasting success, the COLMIL's efforts must be followed by GOC programs to replace terrorist control and a coca-based economy with government security, legitimate economic activities, and effective social programs. As General Ospina said, "There are two difficult factors for the recuperation of La Julia: the guerillas refuse to cede the zone, and the people still lack confidence in the state, even if they believe in the President."

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